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A delineation of the differences between speaking and writing should clarify the functions and possible future of prose. Speech has a speaker to provide language with inflectional stress and a visible audience to respond immediately to that language. On the other hand, prose ("an art of written language")--which is separated in time from an invisible, unknown audience--requires the controlled elaboration of complex thought, an analysis of the processes contributing that thought, and a synthesis of the experience of the writer and his audience. Prose today must also be artfully disguised as "just talk" to compete with the pervasiveness and informality of spoken language. Consequently, modern prose style no longer reflects the balanced emphasis of 18th-century literary constructions, but rather communicates a sense of personal immediacy often at the expense of articulate order, depending on the reader to supply far subtler effects than can be managed by either punctuation or structure. Prose of the future, instead of competing with spoken language to gain an audience, should concentrate on its own best task of preserving the ideals and permanent records of a literate community. (JB)

Opinion

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The Language of Modern Prose

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When M. Jourdain asked what prose was, and was told he had been speaking prose all his life, he was impressed and delighted — but he was misinformed. Anyone who has written French proses at school and subsequently gone to France will have found out that French people do not speak French prose. Prose of any kind is a difficult and complex art which must be learned. When Dogberry says "to write and read comes by nature", the audience is meant to laugh.

Prose has to do with writing and reading; it is an art of written language. If it is a main function of schools to extend literacy, to make literate people, the cultivation of prose, the art of written language, will be a central concern of schools. Through literacy we belong to the modern world and a long civilized tradition. Without it we are confined to our local situation and our present situation and our lives are narrow.

The language of modern prose is written language, and so we begin by asking what writing is. We do well to think occasionally of the remarkable duality in our language, our speech and writing, the moving of muscles in the throat and mouth to make noises, or the moving of sticks of various kinds to make marks on flat surfaces. A visitor from Mars might observe earth for some time before becoming aware that the two systems of communication are related. If he found that we think we have one name though it is spoken or written, he would put this down to the strange fusions that occur in primitive thought.

The fundamental difference between noise and marks implies several other important differences. First and most basic, the noises disappear immediately, the marks are permanent. **Verba volunt, scripta manent.** From this basic difference other differences follow.

For one thing, with the permanent written language, the speaker and his audience can be separated in time. This greatly enlarges the audience for written language, but whereas in speech the person addressed is normally present and visible and hence, to some extent at least, known to us, the audience for writing may be absent and may be very numerous, a whole community, invisible and unknown to the writer. Writing, then, naturally tends to be formal, and to adopt the language used for addressing strangers.

On the other hand the audience separated by the interval of time may be the writer himself. One can write to oneself; you do it when you write a shopping list or keep an appointment book. In speech we have a speaker, language and audience and assume that the speaker and his audience are different people, since the rare case of the person who talks to himself can be called abnormal and most people will accept the classification. But writing can be for private use and there is a most important consequence of this. The lapse of time does not need to be long; the communication can be almost immediate. This is the most important form of self-communication, since it underlies the use of writing for complex thought. If you have to work out a moderately complex sum, you use pencil and paper rather than work it out in your head, thus externalizing your thought. It is like a shopping list on a rapid time scale. As a result, writing allows the working of complex sums and, more important for us, the making of complex sentences to control complex trains of thought.

Written language not only allows elaboration: it demands it. Because the audience is no longer with us, no longer present and visible, there is no shared immediate context to refer to. In speech the situation forms part of the meaning. I say to someone "Nice day" and it is clear what is a nice day. It is the day we share. Or to a friend with streaming eyes, red nose and handkerchief, I say solicitously, "Got a cold?" These are not the normal sentences of the grammar class, with subject and predicate; the subject is clear from the context, the weather around us for instance. It is clear who has the cold. Even in the most informal writing, however, say a letter to a close friend, the subject is likely to be specified: "Today is a nice day", "Sorry to learn you have a cold". Subject and predicate are the basis of written language, where both must be mentioned. If more elaborate sketching in of the writer's environment is necessary, more elaborate sentence structures result, hypotactic constructions where the subsidiary role of some of the details is reflected in their subordinate status in the sentence. Written language is where most complex and compound sentences are found because, in writing, the attendant circumstances which may be taken for granted in speech must be mentioned, but kept subordinate to the main statements.

It may be conceded that this is not an absolute difference. In speech we are not limited to present situations, but children sometimes find it difficult to describe an "absent" situation. If I ask my young son about a film he saw he is likely to reply. "Well there was this man and he had this car . . ." He uses the word this because the situation is present to him though he forgets that it is not so to me. Perhaps it is only after learning to deal with situations not shared with a hearer by learning to deal with them in writing that we deal with them clearly in speech. Then we speak like literate people, that is like people who also write.

Elaboration in prose has another function. Go back to our sums on paper. If I asked you for the sum of all odd numbers up to twenty, you might prefer to use a pencil, jotting down the odd numbers first and adding them afterwards. Here you do two things. You manage a complex thought by communicating with yourself, using writing as an aid to memory (remembering what the odd numbers were) but you also analyse a problem into two phases or processes (enumerating and adding the numbers) which would otherwise have to be combined. So writing is an aid to analysis, particularly through its conjunctions which join "phases" of thought, the clauses in a sentence. This is basic to science and to that prose of rational thought which may be taken as the prose norm. It is said (by Professor T. B. L. Webster) that Greek logic and Greek science developed along with the Greek periodic sentence. This sentence structure has been passed on through Latin to modern languages along with scientific procedures, to be learned, often simply by learning Latin, by those who need to have an understanding of science and administration.

It might appear that writing with its powers of analysis and elaboration adds a dimension to speech, but it adds one dimension only by losing another. Speech gains its richness, variety and complexity not so much from conjunctions and complication of grammar as from the inflexions of the voice, complexities of tone, pause and stress. These tones, stresses and pauses are only very imperfectly represented by punctuation in writing, so that writing has to gain its emphases by grammatical construction rather than tone, and even the most subtle use of conjunctions and constructions cannot equal the expressiveness of the tone of the voice.

In the eighteenth century, however, some control of the tone a reader would use in reading out prose or verse was achieved by the use of balanced items in the sentence. It is possible to teach the reading of eighteenth century verse or prose, and such teaching goes far towards an explanation of its meaning. Thus in a way tone does enter into prose, because prose may be read out, and even the silent reader "feels the weight" of the potential reading. In this way oral work in schools helps the reading and writing of prose, as well as training speech. But the somewhat stylized balance of eighteenth century writing gave way to more natural styles, where less help is offered to the reader. We cannot teach the reading of modern prose so easily, though class practice may bring to light the misreadings that promote misunderstandings and thus will help silent reading since a few errors in understanding intended emphases can lead to bafflement and a "poor reader".

Tone is, then, not unimportant in prose, but the writer cannot normally indicate it exactly. He relies on an intelligent reader to fill the gaps. In the most explicit prose, that of legal documents, the reliance must be entirely on connectives; in scientific writing it is on connectives and punctuation, but in literary writing the writer will appeal to the skill and intelligence of his reader to fill in subtler effects than grammatical construction and punctuation can manage.

Yet, written literature never entirely escapes from written language and its problems. A writer addresses people who do not share his knowledge and environment, so that he is obliged to create a context or frame of reference, a pretended shared environment. At the same time he must put them at their ease. It is as though he receives a stranger and, before he can make him feel at home, he must manufacture an armchair to offer him. His problem is most acute when he writes his opening sentence.

At this stage nothing is established, nothing but the single shred of known shared experience, the existence of the book that unites writer and reader, its title, and the reading situation. The writer must introduce himself and his subject.

Boswell begins his **Life of Dr. Johnson:**

> "To write the life of him who excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others, and who, whether we consider his extraordinary endowments, or his various works, has been equalled by few in any age, is an arduous and may be reckoned in me a presumptuous task."

Here the elaboration of grammar makes it possible to say a good deal, with exactly controlled emphasis. Emphasis is further guided by balance, as in "his extraordinary endowments or his various works"—(where "various" has its full meaning of "varied", "of different kinds"), but the language is formal. This formality is partly overcome not by changing the language but by what is said, by the humility, not too abject for comfort because of the word **may**, or "may be reckoned in me a presumptuous task". Boswell wrote for gentlemen and whether they are strange or not you address gentlemen somewhat formally. Indeed in Boswell's day gentlemen spoke among friends somewhat formally because some of the formality and elaboration of written language carried over into their speech making it into conversation, — which may be defined as speech informed by the virtues of written language.

Jane Austen begins **Mansfield Park** with even less shared knowledge. We knew Boswell would write the life of a well-known man but we have no idea what **Mansfield Park** will be about. The writer must tell us when,

where and to whom what happened. She must begin by "putting us in the picture", by establishing a "shared environment":

> "About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and a large income."

Again a good deal of information is packed into a single sentence, "packed" in a thoroughly orderly way because the prose sentence is designed to put everything in its place with the right amount of emphasis. Again balance helps emphasis as in "an handsome house and a large income".

The elaborate, analytical, formal prose I have described so far is not what we think of as the modern prose of the twentieth century, at any rate of literature (though such writers as Anthony Powell or Martin Boyd remind us that we are generalizing). The language of science and the language of literature have diverged, science becoming more analytical, more impersonal, more stereotyped; literature becoming more immediate, more personal, more various. We reach the phase of history when one talks of "two cultures". Literature seems simpler and more natural than it was. It is really doubly artificial, since it begins with the necessary artifice of all prose, which must create its own environment and communicate with strangers, and adds the artifice which conceals art. The novelist writes to strangers, but pretends he doesn't.

Perhaps the specialization was inevitable as the scientist and literary man developed styles suitable for their separate purposes; perhaps it was helped by the widening of the literary community. In the late seventeenth century literature could be conversational because the literary world was nourished by the speech of the playhouse. The eighteenth century relied increasingly on periodical literature, written essays read throughout England, but gentlemen still refreshed themselves with visits to London and the conversation of the club. A wider world than this brings the isolated artist, and lonely men make friends with strangers. It is perhaps for this reason that writers cultivated more intimacy with their readers, less formality and less distance.

The modern writer will not usually begin with a sedate placing sentence: he buttonholes the reader. For example, D. H. Lawrence, in conscious revolt against Roman orderliness, including the Latinate sentence, does not set us in the scene of **Sons and Lovers** with a sentence resembling the opening sentence of **Mansfield Park**. His opening sentence is:

> '"The Bottoms" succeeded to "Hell Row".'

This tells us very little. There may be a motive of suspense, an invitation to find out more, but perhaps the more important effect is a note of informality. We feel that there is a chap who just drops in and starts talking, and this is an informal situation. We have an impression of a living man, not a book, and being lonely, we value this.

The approach of "the chap who just starts talking" has become almost standard now. Four books taken at random produce: "The farewell was beautiful" (John Wyndham **Trouble with Lichen**). "It was with the advent of the Laurie London era that I realized the whole teenage epic was tottering to doom" (Colin MacInnes **Absolute Beginners**). "Fifteen dollars and three cents" (Brian Moore **The Luck of Ginger Coffey**). "It really begins with the wedding — the Boxing Day Chris got married — because

that was the day I decided to do something about Ingrid Rothwell besides gawp at her like a love-sick cow or something whenever she came in sight". (Stan Barstow **A Kind of Loving**).

The phrase "or something" does not belong in writing because in writing there is time to find the right word and opportunity to alter and revise. The colloquialism is another indication of the author's desire for informality, as is the use of a first person narrator who uses this kind of language.

Writers, then, have turned their backs on the opening sentence which puts us in the picture. We have to wait or pick up our own pieces and make a picture. The techniques is fragmentary, as though an eighteenth century opening sentence had been blasted into scattered clauses for the reader to pick up and put together. Some pieces may be missing altogether, as modern writers frequently concentrate effects by a technique of implication. Much is omitted but much is implied by the opening sentence of Le Carre's **The Spy who came in from the cold:**

> "The American handed Leamas another cup of coffee and said, "Why don't you go back and sleep? We can ring you if he shows up."

It might be said that a scientist selects his audience by using technical language. Do writers select an audience by using formal or informal prose? I thing probably not. Robert Graves' **Goodbye to All That** was very successfully used in matriculation classes in South Australia last year. It begins "As a proof of my readiness to accept autobiographical convention, let me at once record my two earliest memories." This conveys no information yet; it merely establishes informality and suggests the sort of audience that Graves can be informal with. This audience has read so many autobiographies that it notices in an amused way that autobiographies all begin with two earliest memories, taken seriously by the writers. Graves is not taking himself seriously and is not really conventional, but he is willing to play along to show how good natured he is. All this is implied and sets up an informal atmosphere. Perhaps our young readers would not appreciate all this but they probably sense something of it, and, though not naturally a sophisticated audience, become one temporarily, as soft iron can be magnetized by another magnet. This suggests a moral value of reading, if by being addressed as a particular type of person one can become that person and so widen one's sympathies. A good reader is an eighteenth century gentleman in Boswell's presence, a Roman in Cicero's, sophisticated when reading Graves, at ease in the bush with Furphy. The less adventurous reader is less protean and so less tolerant and broad-minded.

The elaboration I saw as a mark of prose is not much in evidence in the opening sentences I have read from modern books. Simplicity is not confined to opening sentences; the fragmentation goes on. At each stage the reader must piece together his information for himself. Hemingway can write:

> "She was gone out of the room. I lay face down on the bed. I was having a bad time. I heard them talking, but I did not listen. Brett came in and sat on the bed."

It may see that the long evolution of the periodic sentence was in vain, but it seems to me rather that the effect of Hemingway's prose depends on our familiarity with a norm that is different. This is brusque, staccato writing, suggesting tight-lipped rather inarticulate toughness because we know that the sentences are shorter than usual. We have a concept of

usual. If all writers wrote like this always, such an effect would go and it would then be, and not merely seem, inarticulate.

Even Hemingway's sentences have a subject and predicate each. Does at least this necessary indication of environment remain unchallenged? No, and before Joyce caught the fleeting predicates in Bloom's mind, Dickens began **Bleak House** with short phrases. The opening sentence is "London". The second paragraph begins "Fog everywhere". Why not "There was fog everywhere"? We say that Dickens' way is more immediate. It is as though Dickens were beside us, talking. It is impression, not analysis. He is not really beside us speaking but if he pretends that he is, using the short isolated phrases suitable for drawing a physically present companion's attention to features in the shared environment, he conjures up the situation by a kind of incantation, the situation where both writer and reader are present at the scene. Perhaps, indeed, the reader is to feel that he is there alone, and the impressions are merely mental impressions, unspoken though formed in the mind. With Leopold Bloom this is certainly the case.

Do we think in language? Do ideas depend on attendant words? If they do, they do not need the elaboration of the opening sentence of **Mansfield Park.** We cannot present to ourselves an unknown environment. Our fleeting thoughts during the day are responses to stimuli — only the responses need be formed in words. If we put our hand in hot water, only the word "hot", the new impression, need form; the rest is in the known environment. Joyce captures these half-formed thoughts in words and so takes written language far from its own nature, not only back to speech but back to private unspoken impressions, the raw material of connected writing. The whole range of language has now been incorporated into written English.

What of the future? What of prose in an age of television? We have many people who tell us, gleefully or dolefully, that written language is on the way out. It cannot compete with the immediacy of the screen and spoken language. Writers have, nevertheless, survived among scenery and speech before, and we might equally well argue that we can look forward now to another great age of prose. Prose flourished best in the eighteenth century. In older times it was too rare, a laborious business of deriving instruction with moving finger and muttering lips. In modern times it has perhaps tried to be too much a substitute for speech and so been too preoccupied with overcoming the real barriers of place and time between writer and reader. Its scope has been widened as a result, but in lesser writers the fragmentation of language to gain artificial naturalness can become "gimmicky", and without the controlling mind of a great artist it is merely fragmentation. In the eighteenth century, prose was common enough to be well exercised and well developed, and yet sufficiently supported by opportunities of conversation (among the class who wrote it) not to be asked to be all things, and so it avoided these extremes. Can an enlightened television policy bring a revival of spoken arts, leaving prose to its own best task of elaboration, analysis and synthesis, to provide the most pervasive ideals and the permanent records of a literate community?